

Dictogloss in Saudi EFL Context: Potential Effects on Students' Writing Skill and Attitudes towards Learning English

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Abstract:

This quasi-experimental study investigates the effects of dictogloss strategy on Saudi EFL writing skills and attitudes towards learning English. It also measures students' attitudes towards learning English using dictogloss activities. The study opens doors for teachers of EFL towards new teaching methods and techniques for writing skills and the English language in general, away from traditional teaching. In order to answer the two main questions of the study, a sample of Saudi EFL college-level students was randomly selected and divided into an experimental group and a control group. The researcher used the dictogloss strategy when teaching the experimental group for five weeks, whereas the students in the control group were taught using the traditional way. Students were matched according to their writing proficiency, instructed by the same teacher (the researcher), and were similar in age. After five weeks of instruction, both groups completed another writing post-test and the attitude questionnaire. Measures of the means, standard deviations, and ANCOVA were used to determine the differences between the two groups. The results revealed a significant statistical difference in students writing skills, including their engagement and motivation in the class and their language output, favoring the experimental group. The study concludes with recommendations for training EFL teachers on using dictogloss when teaching writing and that dictogloss texts should be topic-based materials to integrate different language skills collaboratively.

Keywords: collaborative teaching, dictogloss, EFL writing, Saudi learners writing skills

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Introduction

Among the primary language skills, *writing*, as a productive skill, is probably the most challenging one. Writing has become more challenging than before in an EFL classroom conducive to learning a whole host of language skills. Writing is best taught through reading; the more the learner reads, the better his writing skills become. With the increasing use of social media, writing has become an indispensable tool. Therefore, EFL teachers are not concerned with *what* to teach; instead, they are more focused on enhancing the learner's performance of writing skills. New teaching insights have now come into play to avoid neglecting writing skills. Traditional methods of teaching writing have been successfully replaced by more innovative ideas, which aim to make writing more engaging and less tiring. In addition, EFL teachers now advocate including more than one skill in learning another, a facet that is fundamental in dictogloss strategy.

Although innovative in style and content, EFL has not yet received special attention from methodologists, researchers, and EFL practitioners on teaching writing through integrating collaborative listening, reading, and speaking. Results of studies and the feedback of many Saudi EFL teachers confirm that EFL learners' writing skill is getting less emphasis in Saudi schools. EFL learners make sloppy mistakes, are unaware of cohesion words and transitional connectors, and cannot string words together to form meaning (Al-Hazmi, 2006). Therefore, the current research study aims to investigate the effect of dictogloss on improving EFL Saudi learners' writing skills and their attitudes towards learning English. The current research study is seminal to future considerations, contributing to *how* EFL teachers and EFL learners may move away from traditional writing skills by providing new insights on applying dictogloss in EFL writing classes. Abbasian and Mohammadi (2013) have made it clear that despite studying the effects of dictogloss on listening, vocabulary, and grammar, "a more fruitful avenue would be to be well-versed in its impact on writing skill" (p.1372). Therefore, the current research study answers the following questions:

1. Are there any statistically significant differences between the students' mean scores in the writing pre-and post-tests, which may be attributed to the use of dictogloss in teaching writing?
2. What are the students' attitudes towards learning English using dictogloss activities?

Literature Review

Dictogloss is a teaching procedure that encourages learners to reflect on their output (Wajnryb, 1990). Simply put, dictogloss is a classroom dictation practice whereby learners listen to a read-aloud passage by their teachers. While listening, the learners jot down keywords and ideas to work together later to reproduce a reconstructed version of the read-aloud material. In 1990, Wajnryb introduced "Dictogloss" as an alternative method to the traditional way of teaching grammar. Wajnryb created dictogloss to be practiced in four key steps, which are summarized as follows:

1. *Warm-Up*: learners identify the topic and practice some vocabulary.
2. *Dictation*: The teacher reads aloud the text to the learners at an average speed while taking helpful notes. Typically, the learners listen to the teacher two times: the first time,

they only listen to the read-aloud text without taking any notes, whereas, the second time, they take some notes.

3. *Reconstruction*: The learners work in small groups to reconstruct a new version of the read-aloud text.

4. *Analysis and Correction*: here, the learners compare their new versions of the read-aloud text with the original one analyzing it to make any necessary corrections through discussion.

The practice of dictogloss has several advantages both in research and in practice. Kuiken and Vedder (2002) claim a strong association between dictogloss and collaborative writing tasks: "Collaborative writing tasks in L2 or L1 are often assigned as a way to foster reflective thinking" (p.170). When students practice refuting peers' ideas, they develop critical positions to defend their ideas and writing. Pica (2000) also calls for an integration of traditional and recent methods to better address teaching English skills, depending on either way is insufficient or desultory.

A form-focused approach is advocated more than a message-focused approach in that exposure to language is not solely enough. Ellis (2003) argues that form-focused instruction is of good significance to learners, and it helps them modify their interlanguage grammar, which leads to better linguistic accuracy. In the same vein, Nassaji (2000) states that collaborative tasks require learners to be engaged in cooperative language comprehension and production, such as the practice of dictogloss. For Shak (2006), dictogloss is an activity or practice that focuses on form, which provides a meaning-focused context. This task can foster the learners' awareness of discourse and its linguistic features and structures.

Dictogloss has several advantages in the EFL context. It is popular in EFL methodology because of its discourse-based philosophy of language. Mayo (2002) and Thornbury (1997) have explained that dictogloss focuses on meaning as it looks at the whole text. Through practicing dictogloss tasks, learners can draw their attention to the forms of the target language in such meaningful and productive contexts (Swain & Lapkin, 2001). Qin (2008) emphasizes that one of the essential benefits empirically examined is what is known as Language Related Episodes (LREs). In the same vein, Al-Sibai (2008) noted that learners could be engaged in noticing linguistic problems and encouraged to discuss such meaning more straightforwardly in collaborative dialogues. Another benefit of dictogloss is that it presents an excellent opportunity for L2 learners to pay attention to forms; discuss and negotiate them (Al-Sibai, 2008). In addition, Jacobs and Small (2003) claim that through dictogloss, learners feel more motivated and encouraged to focus their attention on form and the primary language skills.

Studies have also shown that writing is an essential language skill and can be enhanced differently. For L2 learners, it is more recommended to teach them writing skills through collaborative techniques such as dictogloss. Bataineh and Younis (2016) examined the potential effect of dictogloss-based training on selected Jordanian EFL teachers' writing instruction and EFL learners' writing skills. The results revealed that dictogloss has a significant positive impact on EFL learners' writing skills and practices. In addition, Abbasian and Mohammadi (2013) study revealed that dictogloss had positively affected the participants' writing skills. However, while the impact on the organization and mechanics was positive, usage, vocabulary, and content of the learners' writing were less affected.

Bataineh and Younis (2016) asserted that unlike the traditional method of dictation, dictogloss was an activity through which learners write down what is read to them or spoken by their teachers or a movie or any similar ways. However, Afsharrad and Sadeghi Benis (2014) argued that dictation had lost its efficiency and popularity as other language skills have overshadowed it. Due to the advent of technology, dictation has been deskilled. However, recently it has gained some of its pedagogical and academic fame in EFL practices (Faghani, Derakhshan & Zangoei, 2015). Dictation was not used to measure a learner's level of proficiency solely in spelling; it was also used to measure the learner's holistic command of the language. Simply put, dictogloss is an innovative and holistic tool used to arouse more than one skill of the EFL learners.

Pingan & Bin Mohd (2019) have also investigated the impact of using dictogloss on improving sixth-year students' narrative paragraph writing skills. There was a great improvement in the students' ability to write a paragraph orientation of the narrative text. The study concluded that using dictogloss to teach writing lessons enhances the students' writing ability. Active learning is also obtained once dictogloss is enforced in the writing lesson; students were active, attentive, accountable, independent, skillful, and inventive when composing content.

The studies conducted on the dictogloss were not limited to the language skills but also extended to its effect in perceiving students as active learners and raising their motivation and attitudes towards learning the English language. In this context, Pertiwi, Ngadiso & Draji (2018) conducted a study investigating the effects of dictogloss, as compared to direct instruction, on eleventh graders' writing. The study also explored the correlation between students' motivation and writing skills. The results showed that dictogloss is more effective than direct instruction when teaching writing, and students with high motivation have better writing skills than those with low motivation.

Finally, writing is a complex learning process through which learners explore their thoughts, discover more innovative ideas, and generate meanings (Nunan, 2010). For all these reasons, dictogloss is an influential teaching tool that makes writing more than a journey. Despite the large number of studies that dealt with the dictogloss strategy and its impacts on different language skills, one can notice the scarcity of studies that dealt with the impact of dictogloss strategy in a context similar to the Saudi context, except for the study of Bataineh & Younis (2016) and Abbasian & Mohammadi (2013), which were conducted in Jordan and Iran respectively. Also, most previous studies examined the impact of dictogloss on "dictation" as part of the writing skill, while the current study focuses on descriptive writing and its various mechanics. In addition, the current study adopts classroom observation to understand and interpret the quantitative results of the writing test. The current study also explores students' attitudes towards learning English using dictogloss and their evaluation of its impact on different language skills. Hence, the importance of this current study lies in bridging the research gap within the Saudi EFL context and shedding light on the effect of dictogloss on students' writing and their attitudes towards the English language.

Methods

The current study participants were 39 Saudi EFL undergraduate students studying English 101 at Umm Al-Qura University during the first semester of 2019-2020. In order to

obtain more reliable and unbiased conclusions, the sample was randomly selected and assigned into an experimental group of 20 students and a control group of 19 students. The study lasted for five weeks, totaling 25 hours: one session every day. The experimental group received dictogloss practice, tasks, and drills over the class period, while the control group received traditional instruction designed by the textbook's guidelines. The students in both groups were all males, mostly in their twenties; ages ranged between 19 to 24 years.

The researcher randomly selected seven equally long dictogloss texts of different themes from www.breakingnewsenglish.com. The selection of the texts depended on the ideas suggested by reading (2009) to avoid memorization, rote learning, and overloaded materials. Therefore, students could grasp the general concept and utilize their creativity when reconstructing key concepts, words, and phrases. The selected texts varied in their genre and writing type: Mostly, they were argumentative and informative to help students be more engaged in such read-aloud topics. The study parameters included length of the text, difficulty level, consistent reading speed, and clarity of pronunciation.

In addition, pre-post tests were administered to both groups. The students wrote descriptive paragraphs of their university campus and neighborhood in the pre-test and post-test. The students' pre-/post- tests were scored using Obeiah and Batainah's (2015) adoption of Wang and Laio's (2008) analytic scoring rubric. Moreover, the researcher asked a colleague (assistant professor of TEFL) to do in-class observation to monitor students' performance, interaction, and motivation. The aim was to learn more about how students in both groups approach, engage, and tackle different activities. For the writing test to be valid (validity), a group of three EFL experts examined the instrument, and the researcher took their suggestions and recommendations into consideration before adopting the final version. Again, for the instrument to be reliable (reliability), the researcher administered the instruments to a small sample of students (20 students) who were not part of the research study. Two weeks later, the same test was re-administered to the same group and scored high reliability: Cronbach alpha = .87.

Finally, students of the experimental group completed an attitude questionnaire to learn more about their attitudes towards the effectiveness of dictogloss in learning English language skills collaboratively. The attitude scale contains 20 items, which were classified as:

- Six items on students' emotions while learning English.
- Four items on attitudes towards listening.
- Three items on attitudes towards speaking.
- Three items on attitudes towards reading.
- Four items on attitudes towards writing.

A panel of 15 EFL university professors established the validity of the questionnaire, and their feedback was used to adjust the instrument. In addition, the reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed by administering it to the students (n=15) sample, which was not part of the study sample. The reliability coefficient of the test was $\alpha = 0.87$, which is a good indicator for high reliability. Finally, the purpose of this questionnaire was explained to students; they were asked to rate their opinions, on a scale of fair, reasonable, excellent, about how helpful dictogloss activities were in learning English. Students were assured that all personal data would not be revealed to any third party.

Procedures

For the experimental group, the dictogloss practices were conducted as the following sequential steps:

1. The selected topic was introduced to the students, creating a robust engagement to discuss it with the students through keywords or ideas;
2. The main vocabulary of each text or topic was introduced and taught to the students through different ways, among other things, visual aids, synonyms, and examples;
3. The selected text was played aloud at an average reading speed by a recorded voice downloaded from www.breakingnewsenglish.com to ensure that no student is left behind;
4. Students were asked to write keywords, phrases, and ideas as cues to spur them to remember the topic well;
5. A mini-discussion was held by the teacher and the students to discuss the selected items (words, ideas, and phrases);
6. This time, the teacher himself read aloud the text at a typical reading speed with pauses between the main sentences to ensure the students' comprehension.
7. The students were asked to pair up: they divided themselves into groups. They were asked to write their sentences, depending on the notes they took. Then they were asked to compare their work with that of other groups. Here, the students were asked to discuss the correct answers and how to modify their answers;
8. The teacher read aloud the text again so that the students working in groups started to reconstruct the original text, depending on the information they could recall or the notes they took.
9. The teacher checked the work of each group.
10. The teacher asked each student to write his final version of the original text. Again, the teacher asked the students to pair up and work in groups to ensure their correct grammar, content, capitalization and punctuation rules and sequencing of ideas;
11. The teacher checked the final versions of the group work. The teacher then showed the students the final version of the text, providing them with constructive feedback and tips for enhancing their work when conducted next time.
12. Throughout this process, the observer teacher took notes of students' interaction, reactions to instructions, and any other actions they took while doing tasks.

As for the control group, the students were taught following the conventional way as instructed in the teacher's manual. The procedure went through the following sequential steps:

1. The topic was introduced by the teacher.
2. The vocabulary was introduced separately from the topic;
3. The teacher introduced ways to explain the aim of the essays, which helped to generate and organize ideas, leading to essay-editing practice;
4. The students did not listen to the text or have it read by the teacher. They had direct instruction;
5. The students were asked to use their new words and ideas to write the text based on the discussion they held with the teacher;
6. The students were not engaged at all in any group work.

Findings

Before performing the primary statistical test to answer the research questions, descriptive results were obtained to achieve a general understanding of the differences between the means of the two groups, as shown in Table one 1:

Table 1. *Means and standard deviations of pre and post-test*

| Group | Mean | Std. Dev. | N |
|--------------|-------------|------------|----|
| Experimental | Pre: 12.60 | Pre: 3.01 | 20 |
| | Post: 16.65 | Post: 2.75 | |
| Control | Pre: 11.78 | Pre: 2.59 | 19 |
| | Post: 11.73 | Post: 2.49 | |

Table one shows that the control group's mean pre-test score was 11.78, and the post-test score was 11.73. On the other hand, the experimental group's mean pre-test score was 12.60, and the post-test score was 16.65.

These statistics indicate a difference between the mean scores of the two groups in the post-test. To determine the significance of this difference and to answer the first research question, a one-way between-groups analysis of covariance was conducted to measure the effectiveness of using dictogloss on students' writing skills. The use of dictogloss was the independent variable, while the dependent variable consisted of students' scores on a writing test after they were trained on how to use the strategy. Participants' scores on the pre-test were used as the covariate in this analysis.

Table 2. *Tests of between-subjects effects*

| Source | Df | Mean Square | F | Sig | Partial Squared | Eta |
|-----------------|----|-------------|-------|------|-----------------|-----|
| Corrected Model | 3 | 93.44 | 44.23 | .000 | .787 | |
| Intercept | 1 | 8.48 | 4.01 | .053 | .100 | |
| Pre-test | 1 | 180.18 | 85.30 | .000 | .703 | |
| Group | 2 | 32.78 | 15.51 | .000 | .463 | |

R Squared = .787 (Adjusted R Squared = .769)

Computed using alpha = .05

The results of the ANCOVA (as shown in table 2) show that there was a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on post-writing test scores, $p = .000$, partial eta squared = .46. Thus, the partial eta squared value indicates that 46% of the variance in students' writing scores is explained using the dictogloss strategy (independent variable).

Finally, to answer the second question (What are the students' attitudes towards learning English using dictogloss activities?), the researcher administered an attitude questionnaire to the experimental group to gauge how the students reacted towards dictogloss practice in class. Table (3) shows the attitudes of the experimental group (20 students) towards the dictogloss practices.

The results displayed here are the number and percentage of students according to their answers to the following question: How do you evaluate dictogloss activities in learning English?

Table 3. *Opinions of the experimental group about dictogloss*

| Items | Fair | | Good | | Excellent | |
|---------------------------------|------|----|------|----|-----------|----|
| | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| Students' emotions | 2 | 10 | 1 | 5 | 17 | 85 |
| Dictogloss Benefits (Writing) | 3 | 15 | 1 | 5 | 16 | 80 |
| Dictogloss Benefits (Reading) | 3 | 15 | 2 | 10 | 15 | 75 |
| Dictogloss Benefits (Listening) | 1 | 5 | 2 | 10 | 17 | 85 |
| Dictogloss Benefits (Speaking) | 2 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 18 | 90 |

Discussion

By answering the first question, dictogloss positively impacts developing students' writing skills, which is indicated by the statistically significant differences between the means of the students of the experimental and control groups. This result can be explained more by the researcher's notes during in-class observation as part of feedback on the effect of dictogloss on students' writing performance:

- Students tried to pick the key ideas or words (mostly adjectives) and write them down, linking listening with the pre-writing stage to prepare for discussion;
- When asked to pair up or work in groups, students identified the spelling problems and immediately corrected them;
- Many students had some pieces of information missing and managed to provide them only when placed in groups;
- While engaged in the discussion, many students corrected their classmates' misunderstanding, which helped in making the topic clearer to all;
- Many students had difficulty listening to specific ideas or words and thus did not note them down. However, they managed to grasp them only when the text was replayed or reread for them;
- Several students noted the words but had difficulty piecing them together to rewrite the original text. Only through group work did they manage to learn how to use and form such adjectives;
- Several students had difficulty using the comparative and superlative forms of adjectives. When placed in groups, they learned the grammatical equations better: ADJ+ER+THAN and THE+ADJ+EST or MORE+ADJ+THAN and THE+MOST+ADJ;
- Many students linked their listening skills with their writing skills: they reconstructed the text depending on what they listened to and what they knew in writing, spelling, grammar, punctuations, and style;
- Some students were keen on identifying similar-sounding words and helped their group avoid misunderstanding such words (greet vs. great; hard vs. heart; food vs. foot; liar vs. layer).

These findings go in line with Kooshafar, Youhanaee, & Amirian (2012), Bataineh and Younis (2016), and Abbasian & Mohammadi (2013) in confirming that dictogloss has a positive

effect on EFL learners' writing. Dictogloss can enhance students' writing organization, mechanics, and coherence.

Moreover, as seen in Table three, the students categorically rated the use of dictogloss as either excellent or good on most of the six dimensions. At least 75% of the experimental group perceives dictogloss as a beneficial strategy in learning English. Eighty percent of these students believe that dictogloss helps them when learning writing in particular, as experienced throughout the study. The current results go along with Pertiwi, Ngadiso & Draji (2018) and Pingan & Bin Mohd Said (2019) in confirming that teaching writing skills by using dictogloss made the students more active successful in the writing class.

Although they were out of the scope of the current study, other percentages of students regarding other language skills can guide more future research towards using dictogloss to enhance reading, listening, and speaking. As for the control group, based on the in-class observation, the students continued to make the same mistakes over the class time allotted. Their development was negligible or infinitesimal. The students' engagement was a kind of automatic practice, and thus, their improvement was somehow desultory. So Many students felt detached from their class drills that boredom crept over them as the class progressed.

Conclusion

The current research study aimed at investigating the effects of dictogloss strategy on developing Saudi students' writing skills and attitudes towards learning English. Results showed that dictogloss helped improve the students' writing skills in integrating listening and reading skills to writing. Students in the experimental group performed better than the control group in the post-test. In addition, the mini-questionnaire administered to evaluate the attitude of the experimental group towards dictogloss activities in the EFL environment indicated that dictogloss played a vital role in enhancing the learners' writing skills. Dictogloss also helped improve students' overall performance in collaborating with selected audio files, read-aloud materials, and group discussion.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, results, and in-class close observations, the researcher would highly recommend the following decisive points:

- EFL teachers should depart from traditional teaching methods and create robust engagement through in-class dictogloss practices, tasks, and drills;
- Selected topics should integrate collaboratively microscopic language skills;
- Dictogloss should receive more attention as it gives friendly opportunities to students to improve while placed in group work;
- Dictogloss should be part of the weekly EFL classes. It activates and jogs the students' language memory and skills, making the EFL environment more student-centered than a teacher-centered learning environment.

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